Thylacines associated with the Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales

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Species depart the biota, not with a bang but a whimper. The Thylacine, Tasmanian Tiger or Marsupial Wolf, *Thylacinus cynocephalus*, is one of a handful of species, joining the Quagga, *Equus quagga*, and the Passenger Pigeon, *Ectopistes migratorius*, where that whimper has a precise date. The Thylacine became extinct on 7 September, 1936, when the last known specimen died in captivity in the Beaumaris Zoo, Hobart (Smith 1981). Records, both of employees and the visiting public to Australian zoological gardens displaying the Thylacine (Adelaide, Hobart, Launceston, Melbourne and Sydney zoos) represent an important and largely untapped data source of additional knowledge upon the behaviour of this species.

There has been little recognition of the display of Thylacines in Sydney's zoos. Whitley (1973) and Guiler (1985, 1986) have previously published some details on one specimen held early on in the collection of Taronga Zoological Park. In addition to providing further information on this specimen, this paper provides details of two other Thylacines exhibited by the Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales in the Moore Park Zoological Garden's collection.

Thomas Jennings, landlord of the Harvest Home Hotel, Hobart (*Tasmanian News* 1985a) on a visit to Sydney, was so impressed with the collection of animals at the Moore Park Zoo that he offered to procure a Thylacine specimen for the Zoological Society (Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales — hereafter abbreviated to RZSNSW 1887, p. 66; *Sydney Daily Telegraph* 1885b).

It was reported in the daily press that "Mr T. D. Jennings . . . after a great deal of trouble has succeeded in getting a Tasmanian Tiger captured alive, which it is his intention to forward to the Sydney Zoological Gardens" (*Tasmanian News* 1885a). The specimen had been found and bought amongst the stock put up for auction at the Campania sale (*Tasmanian News* 1885b), its locality of capture only noted as "caught in the Buckland district" (*Tasmanian News* 1885a). Thylacines were frequently kept in captivity by private individuals throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and thus it was not unknown for specimens to occasionally appear for sale in the canine sections of agricultural shows.

The Campania sale specimen was shipped to Sydney by Jennings on the S.S. *Flora* (*Tasmanian News* 1885b), leaving Hobart on 12 October (*Hobart Mercury* 1885) and, after stopping at Eden, arriving in Sydney on 15 October (*Sydney Daily Telegraph* 1885a; *Sydney Morning Herald* 1885a). Its arrival was treated as a significant event, and recorded in the regular weekly meeting of the Zoological Society on 16 October, with Jennings receiving a "vote of thanks . . . (for his) donation to the Society" (RZSNSW 1887, p. 58). In the Secretary's report at the next major monthly meeting of the Society, the donation of "this rare Tasmanian marsupial" was emphasized and it was noted that Mr. Jennings had been unanimously elected a corresponding member of the Society "in consideration of this valuable donation" (RZSNSW 1887, p. 66).

Despite the importance attached to the Thylacine by the Council of the Zoological Society, its arrival in October went unrecorded in the Sydney press. Demonstrating their complete lack of interest in anything antipodally zoological, newspaper reports on activities at the zoo in October and November 1885 refer only to exotic imported species: the arrival of a lioness, two leopards, a Bengal tiger, white monkey, two Indian sheep and two young camels; the birth of two tiger cubs (*Felis tigris*); and the death of a zebra (*Sydney Mail* 1885a–d; *Sydney Morning Herald* 1885b). Only the *Sydney Daily Telegraph* later comments upon its presence in the zoo, and this is not in a specific article of interest, but merely the published proceedings of the November monthly meeting of the Society, in which its donation is twice referred to, and it is also noted that "the carpenters have been fully occupied in erecting the dividing fences for the ostrich, emu and cassowary paddocks, and in making cages for the leopards, Tasmanian Tiger, and other animals" (*Sydney Daily Telegraph* 1885b).

The precise length of tenure of this particular specimen in Moore Park Zoo is unknown. Presumably it died in late February or early March 1887, for it was then that the Secretary of the Society wrote to Jennings requesting another specimen. Jennings replied on the 19 March 1887, suggesting that he would "try to get a Tasmanian Wolf but they are very difficult to get alive" (RZSNSW 1887, p. 239). This proved to be the case, and no further Thylacine was forthcoming from Jennings.

In September 1887, in a letter from Dr Edward Ramsay of the Australian Museum, Sydney, an offer was made to provide the Society with another Thylacine for the sum of £20 (RZSNSW 1896, p. 20). It is not clear from the brief mention in the Society's minutes whether Ramsay was already in possession of a live specimen in Sydney, or was just merely communicating an offer made to him from an unnamed Tasmanian source. (Unfortunately, details of this correspondence have not been preserved in the Ramsay manuscript collection in the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.)

The response of the Society was surprising: "It was decided that the offer be declined with thanks" (RZSNSW 1896, p. 21). While the Society's financial status had been imperilled for a considerable time, it had only just the previous month received an extraordinary government grant of £2,000 which accounted for the bulk of the Society's debt (RZSNSW 1896, p. 13), and, while the donation of specimens was naturally preferred, come October 1887 the Society was busy purchasing birds for £10, a baboon for £15 and a camel saddle for £25 (RZSNSW pp. 27, 28, 31). Perhaps it was thought that the price requested was unrealistically high, particularly for an Australian animal. While it must be admitted that £20 for a single specimen was a little steep (two to three times the average amount the other Australian zoos would pay for Thylacine specimens between 1890 and 1910) it is worth noting that the Tasmanian press had published widely available comment upon the value of the animals, by presenting details of the sale of a pair of Thylacines to Regent's Park Zoo, that were formerly in the private collection of Dr Bingham Crowther, and publishing the fact that on their successful arrival in London, Crowther received a cheque for £100 (*Launceston Daily Telegraph* 1883, 1884; *Tasmanian Mail* 1885).

The source and date of arrival of the second Thylacine on display at Moore Park Zoo is unknown, being unrecorded in the Society's minute book (RZSNSW 1911). But there were specimens on display in early September 1903, when the Russian natural scientist, R. Yashchenko, visited Moore Park and, in

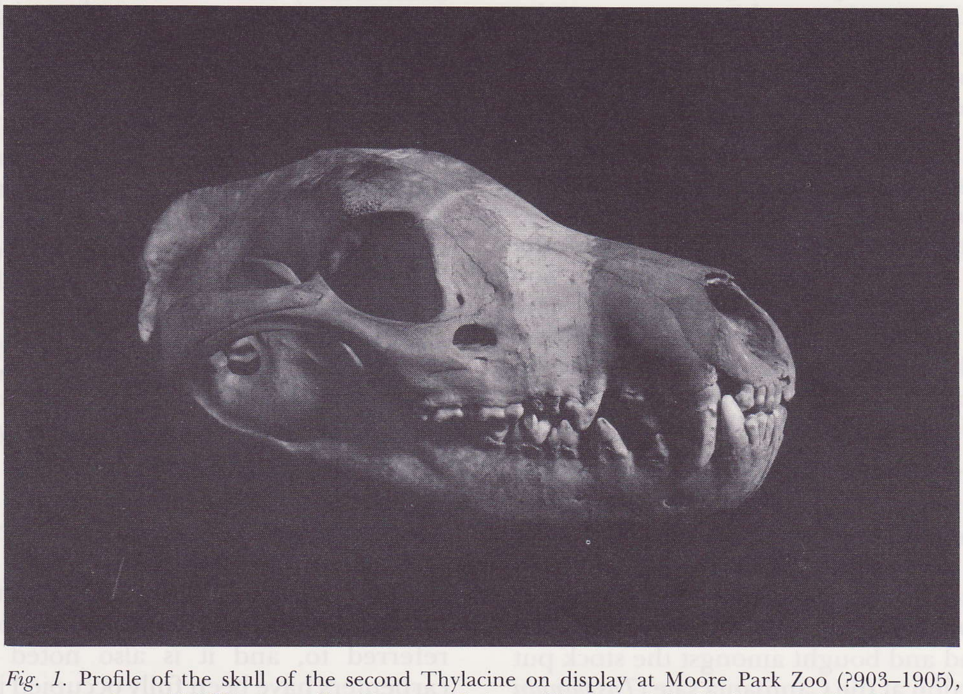

Fig. 1. Profile of the skull of the second Thylacine on display at Moore Park Zoo (?903–1905), specimen M 1821, Australian Museum, Sydney. (Photograph by M. Ortega.) (Tim Flannery, Australian Museum, notes that the toothwear of these captive Thylacines was quite different to that of the wild-caught individuals — Ed.)

writing of his first visit to the zoo and the animals therein, noted in his personal diary the "zoo's marsupial wolf a real rarity" (Tilley, pers. comm.). The exact date of death of the specimen is unknown, but is likely to have occurred in late 1905. It is possible that the Thylacine was one of the many marsupials that apparently died of disease in September 1905, ostensibly due to a "sudden cold snap" (*Sydney Morning Herald* 1905). No details of the deaths have been preserved in the minutes of the Society's meeting of 13 September 1905, but they were significant enough to produce newspaper comment the following day, upon "an unusually heavy death rate among the animals at the Zoological Gardens", with a mortality principally affecting the marsupials (*Sydney Morning Herald* 1905). Certainly the skull of a Thylacine was donated to the Australian Museum from the zoo on 2 January 1906 (specimen No. M 1821, Australian Museum 1991). The Society's own private museum, based largely on departed zoological garden specimens was closed down, disbanded, donated and sold in May 1903 (RZSNSW 1911, p. 30), and, as from February 1905, the Secretary was instructed, as a matter of policy, to "offer the specimens of animals that have died to the Curator of the Australian Museum unless otherwise directed by the Council" (RZSNSW 1911, p. 57b). It is unlikely therefore, that the Thylacine's skull had been kept in the possession of the Society for any great length of time.

The third specimen to be displayed in a Sydney zoo was across the harbour in the new Taronga Zoo site in Ashton Park and came from Mrs Mary Grant Roberts' private collection of animals in the Beaumaris Zoo, Hobart. Albert Le Souef, director of Taronga, had been requesting a Thylacine from Mrs Roberts since 1910 (Bell 1975, p. 75; Guiler 1986, p. 153), but while at times she exchanged other stock with Taronga (Guiler 1986, p. 128; Roberts 1912) she had, in the past, refused to send a Thylacine to Sydney, due, according to Guiler (1986 p. 153) to her "antipathy towards the Director". Whitley (1973) provided the initial details of a specimen on display at Taronga in 1922 and Guiler's research on the historical records of the Beaumaris Zoo, located an entry in the *Beaumaris Cash Book* on 19 April 1919 of the receipt of a cheque for £25 from Taronga Park Zoo for a Thylacine shipped to the zoo on 12 October the previous year (Guiler 1986, p. 153).

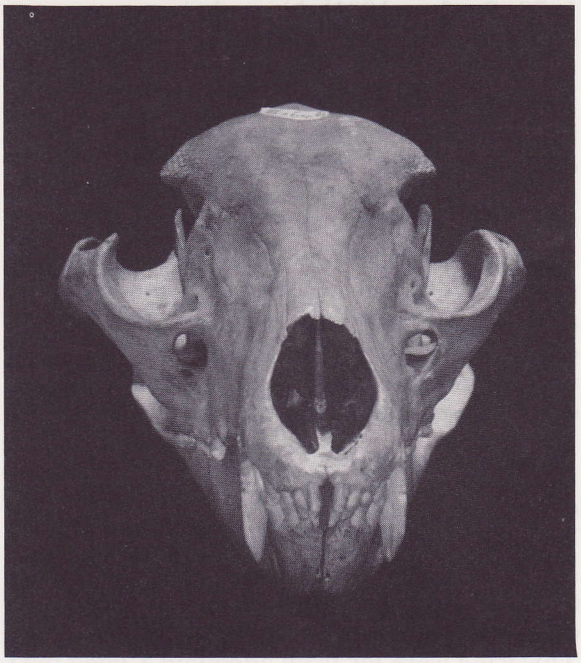
Fig. 2. Front view of the skull of the only Thylacine on display at Taronga Park Zoo (1918–23), specimen S1646, Australian Museum, Sydney. (Photograph by M. Ortega.)

The only available vessel, given the restricted interstate and cross-Tasman trade during the war, was the S.S. *Riverina*, which left Hobart at 4 p.m. on Saturday 12 October (*Hobart Mercury* 1918a) tantalizingly described as bound "for Sydney, via Wellington" (*Hobart Mercury* 1918b). The *Riverina* regularly traded between Hobart, Sydney and Wellington, on occasions travelling a circular route, anticlockwise between these ports, on other occasions returning to Sydney after visiting Hobart. Unfortunately, just as previous suggestions of Thylacines on display at Wellington Zoo (Griffith 1972; Pizzey 1968) have proved to be unsubstantiated, alternative newspaper reports suggest that, on this occasion, the *Riverina* travelled direct from Hobart to Sydney, arriving at 4.40 p.m. on Tuesday, 15 October (*Sydney Daily Telegraph* 1918; *Sydney Morning Herald* 1918), and New Zealand shipping records do not mention either the expectation or arrival of the *Riverina* between 12 and 15 October: the *Riverina* not appearing again in New Zealand waters until its arrival on 21 October, having come direct from Sydney (*Wellington Dominion* 1918a, 1918b).

The relocation of the zoo and the establishment of the Taronga Zoological Park Trust from July 1916 (RZSNSW 1916, p. 35) removed the Society from direct responsibility for managing the zoological gardens (Prince

1979; Strahan 1991). Nevertheless, comments about aspects of the zoo continue to be recorded in the minutes (RZSNSW 1919, pp. 11, 49). However, the arrival of a Thylacine failed to draw comment in the Council minutes of 14 November, nor is there comment upon the specimen in the next three irregularly spaced meetings of 12 December, 1918, 13 March, 1919 or 19 June, 1919 (RZSNSW 1919, pp. 65, 67, 69, 71). Once again, the arrival of a Thylacine in Sydney went unnoticed by the daily press, this for once, being somewhat understandable in the expressed enthusiasm over armistice negotiations.

The arrival of the Thylacine apparently came as some surprise to Taronga's staff. While the first Thylacine on display at Moore Park Zoo in 1885 had a cage specifically built for it (*Sydney Daily Telegraph* 1885b), on this occasion the housing facilities provided for the Thylacine were far from adequate. Caged next to a Puma (*Felix concolor*), and separated from it only by a commonly shared two-inch wire mesh, three weeks after its arrival the Puma managed to pull the Thylacine's tail into its own cage and bite it off. The veterinarian was called for on 5 November and discovered that the "Tasmanian wolf . . . had its tail bitted to within 2 in. of its proximal extremity. . . . Treated as prescribed" (Whitehouse 1918a). On his next visit to the zoo it was noted that "The Tasmanian wolf is progressing favourably" (Whitehouse 1918b).

No permanent effects upon the specimen appeared as a result of being manxed. Whitley (1973) commented upon observing the Thylacine and photographing it, on a visit to the zoo in 1922. Whitley considered "the snapshot . . . not suitable for reproduction" (1973), it was not published and, unfortunately, it has not been preserved in the Whitley Photograph Collection at the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. The specimen survived in the zoo for just over five years, dying on 14 November, 1923 (Le Souef 1923; Troughton 1923). Given the incompleteness of the skeleton and skin, only the skull was apparently preserved and, after being kept for a few weeks at the zoo, presumably for casual display purposes, the skull was then presented to The Australian Museum on 14 January 1924 (specimen no. S 1646, Australian Museum 1991).

The three specimens known to have been exhibited in Sydney zoos admittedly represent modest holdings in comparison with the other Australian zoos known to have exhibited the animal. Between them, Adelaide, Hobart, Launceston, and Melbourne zoos had some 137 Thylacine specimens on display, but these greater holdings reflect inclusion within, or closer proximity to Tasmania, and the stable site localities of the other mainland zoos concerned. It needs to be emphasized, however, that any observation of captive specimens, written at the time in diaries or letters, photographed or remembered at a later date, has the potential to provide useful life history information on the behaviour and biology of this now extinct species. Communication with the author, of any additional information on captive Thylacines, would be appreciated.

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